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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001793

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR PRM A/S KIMMITT AND PDAS RUGGIERO  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR AMBRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN TELLS DAS HALE TO "WAIT AND SEE"  
IF GOL RECEIVES MIG-29 FIGHTER JETS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a December 19 meeting with visiting NEA DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, President Michel Sleiman said everyone should wait and see what comes out of the Russian MiG-29 offer to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). He said the entire GOL had been surprised by the offer, and the LAF would need time to do an assessment as to whether or not it could absorb such equipment. Sleiman added that the Council of Ministers also needed time to review the Russian offer and to approve the deal. However, he said that if Lebanon accepts the Russian offer, it would do so without offering Russia any political commitments, adding that no country could come between the positive relationship Lebanon has with the U.S. Sleiman believed parliamentary leader Saad Hariri was the person who had the most contact with Russian officials and that the Russians may be attempting to fulfill an earlier promise made by Hariri to the LAF for free Russian equipment.

2. (C) On Ghajar, Sleiman said direct or indirect talks with the Israelis were unnecessary and that Israel should accept the UNIFIL proposal for an Israeli withdrawal, as Lebanon had done. However, he said Lebanon would continue working with UN Special Coordinator on Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams on the issue. Sleiman added that there should be a list of independent candidates running in the 2009 parliamentary elections, but that he could not endorse such a list as it would damage his ability to mediate among the battling political parties. DAS Hale told Sleiman he had made the trip to Lebanon to show GOL partners that during the USG's presidential transition period U.S. goals and policy towards Lebanon would remain constant. End summary.

WAIT AND SEE IF  
RUSSIAN JETS ARRIVE

3. (C) In a December 19 meeting with visiting NEA DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by NEA/ELA Desk Officer Matthew Irwin and Poloff, President Michel Sleiman said everyone should, "wait and see," regarding a Russian offer to

supply the GOL with 10 MiG-29 fighter jets. The GOL needed time to look at the details of the offer, according to Sleiman. He said he spoke with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commanding General Jean Kahwagi to determine whether the LAF could absorb such sophisticated equipment into its Air Force squadron. According to Sleiman, Kahwagi said the LAF would need to complete an assessment to gauge the LAF's ability could sustain such equipment. Sleiman also stressed that the GOL had no codified political or military commitments with Russia, at this point, over the MiG-29s. He added that the Council of Ministers would have to sign off on any foreign government donations.

¶4. (C) Sleiman noted that the GOL's relationship with the U.S. was "deep," and no country could damage this relationship, adding that other relationships were "temporal." Sleiman said Lebanon had no intentions to attack Israel with the iGs. He added that the deal should not effect te USG offer to equip the LAF with M-60 tanks and i the GOL were to accept the Russian offer, it would do so without making any political commitments.

¶5. (C) DAS Hale said the USG was surprised by the Russian offer and that it raised a lot of questions in Washington. He continued that the USG valued its long-term working relationship with the LAF, as evidenced most recently through the Joint Military Commission (JMC). While the U.S. had developed a list of items needed by the LAF to support Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, DAS Hale pointed out that fighter jets had never been on this list. He explained that the USG had done a lot of work to convince both the U.S. Congress, as well as the Israelis, that the USG's military

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assistance program with the LAF was no threat to Israel. However, now USG would have to explain to both groups how fighter jets fit into this plan.

¶6. (C) DAS Hale also noted the negative comments made by Defense Minister Elias Murr concerning USG assistance towards the LAF, and how such comments damage the USG relationship with the LAF. He urged President Sleiman to ensure positive official statements about the U.S.-Lebanon military relationship were made soon, to counter damage done by Murr. DAS Hale emphasized that U.S. sought to preserve the relationship it has with the LAF. Therefore, the U.S. would not publicly criticize the offer and would say as little as possible, even though in his view the Russian motivation was meant to embarrass the U.S. He asked that the LAF make its own assessment and determination as to the desirability of accepting the offer.

GOL WILL CONTINUE TO WORK  
WITH UN FOR GHAJAR SOLUTION  
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¶7. (C) DAS Hale briefed Sleiman on his recent trip to Israel, stating that he held encouraging talks with Israeli officials in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and Foreign Ministry concerning a Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar. Israel wanted to find a solution to Ghajar because Israelis officials recognized that a withdrawal from Ghajar would be a easy political victory for March 14, by demonstrating the state of Lebanon can deliver results to the Lebanese people through peaceful means, Hale said.

¶8. (C) DAS Hale noted that the GOI would like three things to occur if a withdrawal from Ghajar was going to take place soon. Primarily, Hale reported, the GOI wanted its withdrawal to be recognized by the international community. In addition, the GOI wanted to be notified in advance of any changes by the UN or GOL to the status of Ghajar, as such changes may effect Israel's security. Finally, Israel wanted a political framework on Ghajar, possibly signed documents, with the GOL to recognize the withdrawal, he said. DAS Hale noted that when UN Special Coordinator on Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams traveled to Tel Aviv on December 22-23 to

hold discussions with Israeli officials over a possible Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar, he would find receptive and open individuals on the Israeli side.

¶9. (C) Sleiman said the GOI should accept the UNIFIL proposal for an Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar without direct or indirect talks. He added that Lebanon should not have to negotiate at all over Ghajar as it is Lebanese territory. Sleiman noted that Lebanon accepted the UNIFIL proposal and that the Israelis were stalling on making a decision on the deal. However, Sleiman said the GOL would continue working with Williams on the issue.

INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES SHOULD RUN FOR  
PARLIAMENT, BUT I CANT ENDORSE THEM  
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¶10. (C) On the issue of his endorsement of an list of independent candidates for the 2009 parliamentary elections, Sleiman affirmed his belief that there should be a central, independent bloc of candidates in the Parliament. He said such a group would not have to be aligned with, or endorsed by, the President. Sleiman added that it would be inappropriate for him to organize or endorse any lists for the elections and that he preferred to stay neutral and maintain his role as mediator to the battling parties.

¶11. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON